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Sips of Time: Identity, Memory, and Emotional Migration in Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* Series

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Abstract

In today's digital world, we find ourselves more disconnected and shaped by loss than ever before. While in our search for emotional closure in a continuously disintegrating world, memory becomes the sole companion to hold onto. Toshikazu Kawaguchi in his bestselling novel series *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, portrays an emotionally profound meditation on time, memory, and healing in times of crises. Set in a small Tokyo café, the novel serves as a poignant metaphorical space, allowing for emotional migration – where visitors can travel back in time, not to change the past but to revisit their shattered selves. But how does the concept of 'home' and identity get redefined? – this study will explore how Kawaguchi's work intimately engages with personal and collective crises, encountering unresolved emotional outbreaks. Thus, by relying on a thematic and affective literary study, this paper will analyse how the *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series, offers an emotional sanctuary – a literary response to grief, memory, and crises of identity.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Emotional Migration, Japanese Popular Fiction, Literature of Crisis and Healing.

Introduction

What if you could just slip away, unnoticed, and travel in time, to a moment that was most tender or painful? Such deceptively simple yet touching premises foreground the settings of numerous contemporary Japanese literary compositions. Regarded by many as a "comfort literature," these works soothe the human soul amidst the raging chaos of life. While there are many writers who fall in this trend, what makes Toshikazu Kawaguchi's works so intriguing lies probably in its deceptively simple setting – a small café with a hushed secret. Despite being

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pushed under the easy categorisation of "comfort literature", Kawaguchi's widely popular *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series, speaks of far greater concerns of the world today.

This paper shall look at how Kawaguchi's narrative engages with the idea of emotional migration – as visitors at the café can journey back in time to revisit their loved ones to heal their fractured selves and confront their unresolved emotions. Living in the digital era, the *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series becomes emotionally resonant with readers across the globe by way of the nature of escapism it promises. Moreover, it serves as a poignant literary response to crisis and grief, allowing the human soul to heal through an emotional migration. Featuring a long list of peculiar rules and engaging in time travel in an almost repetitive ritualistic manner, the café becomes a liminal space allowing humans to bend the dimensions of time to revisit past spaces and old experiences. Thus, by extension, the novels can be seen as offering readers the chance to reconcile with grief, and heal.

Though the entire *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series offers an intensely layered narrative in terms of its examination of the terrains of grief, memory, and temporality, these works are largely dismissed as sentimental or light reading. Thus, this paper situates itself in this scholarly gap by looking at how the *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series offers meaningful contributions to the discourses on identity, memory, crisis, and healing, in the avenues of world literature. Hence, by looking at his work through the framework of emotional migration and literature of healing, this research reconfigures the *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series as profound contributions to literature, investigating the notion of identity and healing from crises in a period of emotional disconnect.

Of Pain and Regret

Kawaguchi posits how the identity of the self is re-mapped as one revisits the past, in a process that I shall hereby refer to as an "emotional migration". It is by way of encountering the past self in its moment(s) of pain, that one is finally able to rebuild oneself and move forward without the past tugging them. Sara Ahmed in her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* talks about the theorisation of pain, asserting, "how we experience pain involves the attribution of meaning through experience, as well as associations between different kinds of negative or aversive feelings." (Ahmed, 2013, p. 23) Thus, pain is realized in relation to lived experiences, moving beyond bodily sensations, allowing it to be interpreted only through 'experience'. Much rather than referring to a raw sentiment, pain is instead mediated through its meaning, and shaped by stories that we (re)tell. Further, drawing on from what Ahmed suggests, pain can rarely exist in isolation, but links itself to 'different kinds of negative or aversive feelings' pulling in other associative negative feelings like grief, and regret. It is this very associative nature of pain, as it links itself to other 'aversive feelings' that in turn makes it what Ahmed herself refers to as 'sticky.'

Pain of Unresolved Emotions

In the small café that Kawaguchi constructs in his works, pain operates in this sticky form – attaching itself to objects and spaces, migrating and transpiring between bodies and material objects around, structuring how the world exists. The first book in the series, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* introduces Fumiko – one of the first visitors in the café to travel in time to reconcile with her lover Goro, who left for America. Left with unresolved emotions of regret and bitterness in the advent of her lover's departure, the only hope for Fumiko remains in revisiting the moment of their last conversation. In travelling back in time, she undergoes not a geographical but an emotional migration – hoping to reconcile and reconstruct herself in encountering her lover, as she thinks, "If I return to the past, I might be able to set things right. I might be able to have a conversation with Goro once more." (Kawaguchi, 2019, p. 9) When

she returns to the present, she doesn't undo her loss, but learns to accept the momentary absence in the hope of a rejuvenating return. Her pain no longer consumes her wholly, but her emotional migration away from a pained suffering self, helps to reorient herself and find her notion of 'home' even amidst the sense of loss and hopelessness that she had spiralled into, following the departure of Goro. Thus, an inward emotional migration enables Fumiko to not let pain and regret consume her wholly, but rather liberate herself in the hopes of a better future where she could reunite with Goro.

Thus, Kawaguchi portrays migration as an inward affective process. In contrast to traditional narratives of migration, it focuses on the inward migration of the self, across the chronotope. So, the idea of an emotional migration when applied to Kawaguchi's work shows how the contours of the self are remapped, as characters navigate themselves through their pain, reconciling with past emotions. In a way, pain becomes the very medium through which the migration happens – as it sticks characters to moments in the past while also liberating them for the present that lies ahead.

Of Trauma and its Belatedness

Cathy Caruth, a vital name in the field of trauma studies in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, deals with the question of trauma. She explains trauma as an experience that is grasped in its entirety only in its belatedness, thus forcing the victim to relive the moment of the traumatic event, as she says, "[…]trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature–the way it was precisely not known in the first instance–returns to haunt the survivor later on." (Caruth, 2016, p. 12) Applying this theory of belatedness to Kawaguchi's narrative, one can come to see how the cozy ambiance of the café serves as a space where the characters revisit these traumatic moments, to process what had originally transpired. But unlike in Caruth's work that suggests how there is a sense of agency-lessness in revisiting the traumatic moment, Kawaguchi focuses on characters who voluntarily revisit the moment of trauma, either for an inward emotional migration, or a reconciliation with past experiences/a person, or to seek their identity and find a sense of 'home.'

Missed Chance and Regret

In Kawaguchi's work, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, the story of Hirai going back in time to see her sister before the latter dies in an accident is a poignant embodiment of the belatedness of trauma. Hirai can never really leave behind the traumatic moment, for it remains internalized in a way that it becomes a part of her everyday reality. Her experience aligns closely with Caruth's idea of how the intensity of a traumatic event is not fully assimilated in the moment of its occurrence (Caruth, 2016) – for it is only later that Hirai realizes the intensity of the sorrows of losing her sister, and immediately regrets pushing her sister away. Thus, the café again occupies a poignant space both in the outer narrative framework and even in Hirai's inner storyline, as it offers a space for her to belatedly face her sister. She doesn't experience the traumatic feeling of loss while the event happens, but rather it is through meeting her sister by traveling back in time that Hirai is finally able to experience the trauma, as she faces her sister in the past, with the knowledge of her absence in the present. When the two sisters just sit together at the table, a moment of silence grasping them, and Hirai thinks, "How kindly you look at me after I've been so horrible for so long. You held on to these kind feelings while you continued to wait for me for so long. Always wishing we could work together at the inn. Never giving up. But I […]" (Kawaguchi, 2019, p. 157) – one can realize how Hirai must have been shaken by grief and disappointment over herself, thinking of how she had treated her sister, for, all she could tell her sister in the end, was a mere 'Thank you'. This event becomes traumatic for her missed chance to act differently towards her sister.

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Trauma of Unassimilated and Suppressed Emotions

Going beyond the traditional historical understanding of trauma as a physical wound, Caruth argues trauma to be an injury on the mind, something that unsettles the mind. Unlike the physical body, the mind becomes an 'unhealable' space. Thus, as according to Caruth, the only way for the survivor to grasp the traumatic event is by repetition and reliving. Unable to attend his mother's funeral, Yukio in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold Tales from the Café*, is plagued by his sense of guilt, remorse, and loss. Thus, when he journeys back in time to meet his mother, the act of seeing her again creates a ripple in his chest, as he ponders, "If it was possible to change the present by going back in time, then he probably wouldn't have chosen this ending." (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 102) Due to his absence in his mother's funeral, Yukio, is ultimately unable to 'claim' the experience as his, thus creating an unbridgeable gap in his mourning. It is because he never got the chance to process the grief and loss of losing his mother in real-time, that the event remained unassimilated. For Caruth, trauma is far beyond the mere happening of a painful event, but lies rather in the failure to experience and grasp it in its entirety. So, when Yukio travels back in time to see his mother, he is finally able to experience the loss that he ought to have felt had he experienced her death in real-time. Trauma for Yukio isn't catastrophic, but rather ordinary. Thus, Kawaguchi's work can be seen to expand trauma theory to grasp the commonplace emotional outbreaks as experienced in the everyday, reflecting how suppressed emotions as in the case of Yukio can turn to acquire traumatic weight over time.

Of Home, Trauma, and Identity

Cathy Caruth borrows much from the theorizations of Freud on traumatic repetition and revises it, suggesting it to be far more complex. She offers instead a more extended model of traumatic repetition, asserting how trauma is not only about the simple occurrence of an event but rather the impossibility of fully assimilating it at that moment, thus leading to an experience that is unclaimed (Caruth, 2016). The curiously small café in Kawaguchi's works, emerges thus as a paradoxical 'home' allowing its visitors to journey in time to reconstruct their identities by facing their unresolved emotional outbreaks, for "Inside every person is an inherent capability to make it through any kind of difficulty." (Kawaguchi, 2022, p. 180)

Anguish of Deferred Love and Regret

The story of Reiji as narrated in *Before Your Memory Fades* is one of deferred love and unassimilated grief. Having silently loved his childhood friend from afar, but never once articulating it, he suffers in silence. What further intensifies the situation is the knowledge that even his friend, Nanako also loved him back. For Reiji, the moment of trauma lies not only in the moment of losing his beloved, but rather in the impossibility of never fully experiencing the sheer joy of being in a relationship with her, whilst she was still healthy and fit. For him, the idea of 'home' was truly encapsulated in the very presence of Nanako, in their shared moments of companionship, fostering a sense of belonging, compassion, and love – all of which one looks for in a 'home.' Returning from Tokyo, when Reiji learnt of the illness that Nanako was suffering from and how she hid it from him to not discourage him from chasing his dreams, Reiji was tormented by grief and his inability to articulate his feelings to her, thus keeping them suspended and unresolved. His return thus exemplifies Caruth's idea of how trauma often elicits a delayed response. While his confession doesn't necessarily seize his grief, but it helps him reconfigure his sense of selfhood such that it was no longer defined by an unspoken silence. The café by allowing him to travel back in time and confess to her, becomes the cure that he never knew he needed, helping him reconfigure his selfhood, and his idea of 'home' that he had found in Nanako. When he travelled back in time and indirectly proposed to Nanako, by stating blatantly how they would be married in the future, he doesn't just offer hope to Nanako to fight through her illness, but also provides himself with the strength he needs

to live on even in her absence. Thus, his un-narrated silence of the past pulled him back in time, and it is only in narrating it that Reiji finally comes to reconstruct his sense of self. The beauty of his confession lies in how it had the power to alter the reality, transforming how Reiji saw himself in the present, both during the moments whilst Nanako was still there, and in her absence, for in the words of Kawaguchi, "But your memory of what happened today will remain with you." (Kawaguchi, 2023, p. 43)

Configuring Identity and Claiming Loss

Megumi one of the characters in Kawaguchi's *Before We Forget Kindness*, is a widow torn apart by the joy of giving birth to her child, and simultaneously the grief of losing her husband, who couldn't even see their child. Even as she welcomes new life to her life, her sense of home was already emptied out by death, and the baby, still unnamed, presents the embodiment of an incomplete family narrative, a life that wasn't still fully integrated in the sense of identity. Applying Caruth's theory of the belatedness of trauma, it isn't difficult to grasp how trauma for Megumi wasn't only defined by the loss of her beloved husband but in her inability to grasp the loss in its entirety – creating a loss that is unclaimed, a rupture that is unassimilated. The café becomes the space for the belated decoding of trauma. As Megumi travels back in time to meet her deceased husband and thus name their still unnamed child, she knows that she cannot undo his death. All she can do is symbolically heal the traumatic gap that had been created in his absence. While still doubtful at first about journeying through time, it is in her final decision to go back in time to meet her husband, that shows her resilience to move beyond the trauma that his absence had created in the immediate present. As Megumi meets her husband and tells him, "I want you to name our child, Riuji. I want to be able to tell her that she was named by her father. I want her to grow up knowing that. So please, give her a name." (Kawaguchi, 2024, p. 76) – it comes off more as an ardent plea from the soul. The act of naming their child becomes a step that allows the child to be inscribed an identity of its own, and to be integrated in the ritualistic notion of home-making. The café thus becomes a vital space that allows for identity to be formulated, and for healing to finally take place. Even for Megumi herself, the chance to see her partner once again, allows to reconstitute her identity, both as a bereaved partner and as a new mother. It allows her to move beyond loss and grief, for she can finally carry the loss of her husband not just as a painful absence that creates an emotional void in its wake, but rather as a perpetually devoted presence in her and her newborn's life – all through the act of naming the child.

Toshikazu Kawaguchi's works are thus enlightening in the way they narrativize the ideas of identity, memory, and emotional migration. It is interesting how the café's inquisitive feature of time-travel does not allow visitors to change what has already transpired, but instead allows them a second chance to confront the memory, and the pain of a bygone experience, thus allowing it to be integrated into the present self, reformulating identity. Through each story, Kawaguchi reveals how trauma and pain are not merely obstacles on the path to identity, but can rather act as forces that shape it, via an inward emotional migration of the self. The notion of identity as perceived in these works is continually shaped and reshaped through moments of absence, loss, and delayed decoding. Memory, be it painful or tender acts as the much-needed bridge for the characters to reconstruct their sense of selfhood, through an inward journey – an emotional migration. Despite the several strict rules of the café regarding time-travel, we still find visitors taking this journey across temporal boundaries, to ultimately cross over their emotional terrains of regret and loss, to finally come to a moment of reconciliation and healing.

'Home' as in the works of Kawaguchi, is not a static space nor a destination for characters to reach. Instead, it is affectively constructed, where absence silently coexists with presence. The café exists thus in a site of liminality, serving as a symbolic 'home' for the

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unclaimed experiences of its visitors. By introducing different visitors to the café, from different walks of life, with their very own experiences, Kawaguchi highlights the universality of the human struggle to move beyond the traumatic event to heal oneself, find a sense of belongingness, and reconfigure one's identity and sense of selfhood. Thus, to be able to revisit the past, even if it is only for a brief moment, "before the coffee gets cold," (Kawaguchi, 2023, p. 25) becomes in a way, a transformative act for the visitors at the café, allowing them to realize how identity and home are never really sites of permanence, but are rather only reconfigured through memory and experiences, for, each of those visitors who return back from their temporal journey are (un)consciously reoriented and reconfigured towards a renewed sense of self, that pushes them to thrive and foster beyond the traumatic moment, beyond the past experiences tugging behind them. For life happens in the liminal space between birth and death and as in the words of Yukari, the owner of the café, "[…]we mustn't allow the death of a person to be the cause of unhappiness. The reason for that is simple: if we let everyone who dies be a cause for unhappiness, that would mean people are being born to become unhappy. But the opposite in fact is true." (Kawaguchi, 2022, p. 237)

Conclusion

By relying on the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth and the notion of 'stickiness' of emotion, this research has thus reimagined the contours of trauma, identity, and belonging as seen in the contemporary Japanese literature of Toshikazu Kawaguchi, the *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series. The theoretical framework of trauma theory when applied to the more mundane or everydayness of trauma as seen in the works of Kawaguchi, reveals the café as an affective space where visitors are allowed to confront their unassimilated past, albeit belatedly, yet voluntarily, and thus narratively reclaiming them.

Hence, trauma as reimagined in the works of Kawaguchi, emerges as a more everyday, relational, and subtle experience, instead of remaining a catastrophic rupture. Additionally, as many of the visitors travel across time, their experiences narrate how identity can never really be static, but is constructed and reconstructed through experience, and memory. Thus, memory instead of being defined as passive recollection, comes up as an active process of reorienting oneself. The idea of 'home' on the other hand, is envisioned as a space that is dynamically constructed – one that is both domestic, and emotional.

Striving in a post-pandemic world where one is more defined by fragmentation and loss, than by connection, the works of Kawaguchi offer a sense of healing amidst crises. His seemingly simple stories with their equally simple setups, subtly hint at the philosophy of being. Working on trauma theory, this study revisits Kawaguchi's works as potential contributions to contemporary literature, that highlights the essence of healing after trauma, and reconciling with past experiences. These works speak to the reader through its acutely profound meditation on reconstructing identity, and reconfiguring one's sense of home; all through the tender and passionate act of reencountering past experiences 'before the coffee gets cold'.

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Bio-note

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